

Relationship of Political Skill and Impression Management: A Theoretical Review

Ahmed Ali*

University of Science and Technology of China

*Corresponding author email address: ahmedali.ustc@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

This research investigation theoretically links political skill and impression management literature. Mainly political skill is found to have strong theoretical linkages with social influence tactics. Political skill is a comprehensive strategy of social competencies which plays a vital role in activation of social influence tactics. In this paper it is theorized that political skill is related with self-promotion, ingratiation and exemplification. It is also found that political skill is largely found to have greater linkages with ingratiation strategies.

Keywords: Political Skill, Impression Management, Self-promotion, and Ingratiation

INTRODUCTION

Historically organizational political has been the interest of research scholars. However, less is known about the skills and competencies required to practice politics to be successful in organizations. Despite the fact Pfeffer (1981) and Mintzberg (1983) highlighted the importance of PS in politics literature; there has been no informed understanding of the construct and measurement of PS. Ferris and colleagues (2005) defined the construct, developed a measurement instrument, distinguished PS from other related constructs, provided an initial theoretical foundation (Ferris et al., 2007), and later made further theoretical and empirical advancements (McAllister, Ellen III, & Ferris, in press; Munyon, Summers, Thompson, & Ferris, 2015). As now, cumulative empirical evidence suggests that PS

is an essential personal characteristic for individuals to exercise the social and political influence on a variety of productive outcomes (Munyon et al., 2015).

As modern business organizations have been rapidly facing scarcity of resources and diversity of interests, political behavior is considered acceptable part of workplace social interactions. Moreover, due to complexity in work operations, success has become more subjective and supervisory performance evolutions have now highly dependents on supervisors' perceptions. Thus, career success is very much a political endeavor in organizations. Although the traditional focus of organizational political has been on the negative side, recently political behavior has been considered as a beneficial tool to the development of productive relationships (Shi, Johnson, Liu, & Wang, 2013), conflict resolutions and restoration of justice (Hochwarter, Ferris, Zinko, Arnell, & James, 2007). Thus, research scholars have now opinion to suggests employees and managers develop certain PS in order to perform better in the organizational political environment and be able to influence others (Munyon et al., 2015).

Although the initial theoretical and empirical work on IM originally examined by sociologists and social psychologists, organizational scholars have also become increasingly interested in this topic over the past four decades. As a result, our understanding of IM has substantially increased and IM is now considered as a familiar occurrence in an organizational context. IM is the process whereby people (as actors) seek to create the desired image or otherwise alter the desired identity others (commonly referred to as targets—supervisors, subordinates and peers) have of them (Bolino, Kacmar, Turnley, & Gilstrap, 2008; Rosenfeld, Giacalone, & Riordan, 1995). IM tactics attempt to manage with the intention that one's desired or altered image will eventually lead to expected outcomes (Wayne & Liden, 1995). Indeed, such tactics play important roles in the deployment of resources in organizations (Becker & Gerhart, 1996; Leary & Kowalski, 1990).

Given the wide array of IM tactics and increasingly dynamic nature of performance criteria in different organizational context, researchers have empirically examined IM behaviors in a variety of workplace settings. For example, the research focused on the use of IM tactics in the context of performance appraisal (Brouer et al., 2014;

Huang et al., 2013), interviews (Chen, Wen-Fen Yang, & Lin, 2010; Roulin, Bangerter, & Levashina, 2015), feedback seeking (Ashford & Northcraft, 1992; Dahling & Whitaker, 2016) teamwork (Turnley & Bolino, 2001), creativity (Liu, Wang, & Wayne, 2015) promotability (Long, Baer, Colquitt, Outlaw, & Dhensa-Kahlon, 2015; McFarland, Ryan, & Kriska, 2003), career success (Judge & Bretz Jr, 1994) Justice (Koopman, Matta, Scott, & Conlon, 2015) and personality traits (Bourdage et al., 2015)

POLITICAL SKILL AND IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT

Both theoretically and empirically, the PS construct includes multi-dimensions: social astuteness, networking ability, apparent sincerity and interpersonal influence. These dimensions are considered to relate to one another, but they remain separate constructs. Interpersonal influence includes individuals abilities to be adaptive; what Pfeffer (1992) referred to as flexibility, in order to adjust behavior to different situations to produce the desired responses from others. Individuals with networking ability are able to develop networks of diverse people. Such contacts in the networks may possess assets which are valuable and essential for personal success. PSd individuals with such abilities tend to develop friendships, important coalitions and beneficial alliances by keeping themselves in advantageous positions to take advantage of the opportunities. PSd individuals with high apparent sincerity tend to appear as being authentic and as having high levels of integrity, genuine and sincere. These individuals are, or tend to be, forthright and honest. Apparent sincerity is important for successful influence attempts because it focuses on the underlying intention of the behavior. Perceived motives are critical because influence attempts are successful when the target perceived no ulterior motives of the behavior exhibited by the actor (Jones, 1990). Therefore, apparent sincerity provides skills to individuals to build trust with others so that their behaviors are not perceived as coercive and manipulative. Social astuteness garners individuals to skillfully understand and incisive observation of social interactions. This ability allows individuals to accurately interpret behaviors of oneself and others in diverse social settings. Pfeffer (1992) argued the basis of ability is “to identify with others that is actually critical in obtaining things for oneself”.

Over the period of last four decades, a number of IM tactics and taxonomies have been identified and examined in work settings (Jones & Pittman, 1982; Kipnis, Schmidt, & Wilkinson, 1980; Wayne & Ferris, 1990; Wayne & Liden, 1995). By and large, however, scholars have examined mainly the assertive IM behaviors that employees use to create a certain image. In their review article, Bolino et al. (2008) reported more than 30 IM behaviors that have been identified by scholars. Recently, another review conducted by Bolino et al. (2016) revealed that there are more than 45 behaviors and motives that have been labeled as types of IM along with 13 measuring scales, however, many of them appear to overlap noticeably. For the current study, three types of IM tactics were used which were identified by Jones and Pittman's (1982): self-promotion, exemplification, and ingratiation. The decision to incorporate Jones and Pittman's (1982) taxonomy based on several reasons. First, it received increasing attention and has been rigorously operationalized (e.g., Bourdage et al., 2015) with an increased emphasis on specific behaviors. Thus, it is considered the only IM framework that has empirically validated measure (Bourdage et al., 2015).

Exemplification refers to the behaviors on the part of the actor to show others (peers or supervisor) the tendency of doing more than the required in order to control how other perceive the images of the actor. There might be several reasons for exhibiting such behaviors but the unique point in such behavior is to purposefully manage others judgment. Jones and Pittman (1982) noted exemplification as an IM behavior just like other IM behaviors (e.g., self-promotion, ingratiation), but relatively less attention has been paid to this behavior (Long 2017). Overall, the innate purpose of exemplification is similar to other IM behavior is to create a positive image in the eyes of the target and to avoid bad impression, which could bring in important outcomes such as pay raises, performance and promotions (Bolino et al., 2016).

However, there are chances that exemplification tactics may not generate the intended influence. Consequently, instead of creating a positive image, the target may perceive such tactics as inauthentic or deduct some ulterior motives or may be something other than the desired identity (e.g., dedicated or moral). Normally this occurred when methods through which such tactics are applied are dubious or the situations under which such tactics used are not suitable (Jones, 1990).

For instance, if an actor stays late in office only when actors' boss stays, and leaves office early in other days. This may create some situation where the target may judge such inconsistency that may lead to negative image building instead of getting supervisory attribution of dedication. Scholars have pointed to several reasoning why exemplification could not get intended results. One of these reasons is non-corresponding inference—as a situation where target refused to observe the behavior at face value. For instance, if an employee is asking something from a supervisor which is very obvious and supervisor knows that the employee already knows it. Thus, the supervisor more likely to attribute such behaviors as dubious tactics (Brooks et al., 2015). Another case where exemplifier may not get the desired results is when actor dragged things too far (by overdoing or taking to too extreme) which exposes the manipulative intent in front of the target (Baron, 1986; Gardner & Martinko, 1998). Finally there are also instances where actor without doing anything significant asking for feedback which causes irritation to the target. Consequently, the target may just opt to not respond to such actions.

Research has shown that the supervisors have been the main targets of ingratiation behaviors. Ingratiation behaviors are also labeled as supervisor-focused IM tactics (Wayne & Ferris, 1990). Ingratiation tactics include a variety of behaviors such as rendering favors, praising important qualities of the target, showing conformity towards others. The main purpose of ingratiation behaviors is to evoke likeability reactions from the target that may also relate to personal attractiveness.

Unlike self-promotion, ingratiation behaviors are more likely to get positive outcomes. However, there are chances that the target would not get the intended influence and results might not be the same which the actor desire. Consistent with this argument, in their meta-analysis study Higgins et al. (2003) reported high heterogeneity between ingratiation and outcomes. Their results show that the correlation between such variables ranges between -0.28 to 0.74 at 95% confident interval. Thus, the success or the failure of ingratiation behaviors is highly dependent on the actor, the target and the situation in which the particular tactics are applied. Interestingly, IM theory explicates similar stance for all IM tactics. Therefore, research on social influence increasingly incorporating such context in order to investigate the effectiveness of IM behaviors.

For instance, researchers in social influence scholarship attributed the likelihood of ingratiation behaviors effectiveness to “ingratiator’s dilemma”. According to this dilemma, the situations in which actors are more likely to be involved in ingratiation behaviors are the same situations where targets are more likely get skeptical about actors’ behaviors. Thus, there are higher chances that target, under that situation, may attribute the ingratiation behaviors of the actor differently. Consequently, intended influence may not be achieved by the actor.

According to Jones & Pittman (1982) classification self-promotion includes highlighting one’s own accomplishments, taking credit and undermining important others, to appear competent by the target (Bolino & Turnley, 1999, 2003). Ingratiation involves opinion conformity, praising others, favor-doing, and taking an interest in others, in an attempt to elicit the attribution of likability by the target (Gordon, 1996). Exemplification entails performing dedicated, moral and extra-role behaviors such as appearing to be freely chosen, displaying enthusiasm, and showing support, with the expectation to be seen as dedicated by the target (Long, 2017).

Self-promoters tend to be self-centric by highlighting their accomplishments to be seen as competent by the target (Jones & Pittman 1982). However, self-promoters inclined to enhance their image through various behaviors that can be proved as a slippery slope and can have risk looking less competent, especially when they over exaggerate their accomplishments, or they appear high self-centric (Bolino et al., 2016). For the most part, self-promotion produced positive and consistent results in interview context (Barrick et al., 2009; Chen et al., 2010). However, research has been shown inconsistent results in work settings. Higgins et al. (2003) meta-analysis found a statistically non-significant correlation between self-promotion and job performance ratings, and other researchers found that self-promotion can actually negatively influence an employee’s performance evolutions (Bolino et al., 2016). Despite researchers (Brooks, Gino, & Schweitzer, 2015) have suggested several recipes to enhance our understanding on how self-promotion can work effectively, there is still much we do not know about other contexts in which self-promotion can be effective (Bolino et al., 2016).

CONCLUSION

Both political skill and impression management are important in articulation of influence within social and political aspects of workplace environment. Political skill grants certain social abilities to individual through which they exert their influence by using impression management tactics.

REFERENCES

- Ashford, S. J., & Northcraft, G. B. (1992). Conveying more (or less) than we realize: The role of impression-management in feedback-seeking. *Organizational behavior and human decision processes*, 53(3), 310-334.
- Baron, R. A. (1986). Self-Presentation in job interviews: When there can be “too much of a good thing”. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 16(1), 16-28.
- Becker, B., & Gerhart, B. (1996). The impact of human resource management on organizational performance: Progress and prospects. *Academy of Management Journal*, 39(4), 779-801.
- Bolino, M. C., Kacmar, K. M., Turnley, W. H., & Gilstrap, J. B. (2008). A multi-level review of impression management motives and behaviors. *Journal of Management*, 34(6), 1080-1109.
- Bolino, M. C., & Turnley, W. H. (1999). Measuring impression management in organizations: A scale development based on the Jones and Pittman taxonomy. *Organizational Research Methods*, 2(2), 187-206.
- Bolino, M. C., & Turnley, W. H. (2003). More than one way to make an impression: Exploring profiles of impression management. *Journal of Management*, 29(2), 141-160.
- Brooks, A. W., Gino, F., & Schweitzer, M. E. (2015). Smart people ask for (my) advice: Seeking advice boosts perceptions of competence. *Management Science*, 61(6), 1421-1435.
- Chen, C. C., Wen-Fen Yang, I., & Lin, W. C. (2010). Applicant impression management in job interview: The moderating role of interviewer affectivity. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 83(3), 739-757.
- Dahling, J. J., & Whitaker, B. G. (2016). When can feedback-seeking behavior result in a better performance rating? Investigating the moderating role of political skill. *Human Performance*, 29(2), 73-88.
- Gardner, W., & Martinko, M. J. (1998). An organizational perspective of the effects of dysfunctional impression management. *MONOGRAPHS IN ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOR AND INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS*, 23, 69-126.

- Gordon, R. A. (1996). Impact of ingratiation on judgments and evaluations: A meta-analytic investigation: American Psychological Association.
- Hochwarter, W. A., Ferris, G. R., Zinko, R., Arnell, B., & James, M. (2007). Reputation as a moderator of political behavior-work outcomes relationships: A two-study investigation with convergent results. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 92(2), 567.
- Jones, E. E. (1990). *Interpersonal perception*: WH Freeman/Times Books/Henry Holt & Co.
- Jones, E. E., & Pittman, T. S. (1982). Toward a general theory of strategic self-presentation. *Psychological perspectives on the self*, 1, 231-262.
- Judge, T. A., & Bretz Jr, R. D. (1994). Political influence behavior and career success. *Journal of Management*, 20(1), 43-65.
- Kipnis, D., Schmidt, S. M., & Wilkinson, I. (1980). Intraorganizational influence tactics: Explorations in getting one's way. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 65(4), 440.
- Koopman, J., Matta, F. K., Scott, B. A., & Conlon, D. E. (2015). Ingratiation and popularity as antecedents of justice: A social exchange and social capital perspective. *Organizational behavior and human decision processes*, 131, 132-148.
- Leary, M. R., & Kowalski, R. M. (1990). Impression management: A literature review and two-component model. *Psychological bulletin*, 107(1), 34.
- Liu, D., Wang, S., & Wayne, S. J. (2015). Is being a good learner enough? An examination of the interplay between learning goal orientation and impression management tactics on creativity. *Personnel Psychology*, 68(1), 109-142.
- Long, D. M. (2017). A method to the martyrdom Employee exemplification as an impression management strategy. *Organizational Psychology Review*, 2041386616663816.
- Long, D. M., Baer, M. D., Colquitt, J. A., Outlaw, R., & Dhensa-Kahlon, R. K. (2015). What will the boss think? The impression management implications of supportive relationships with star and project peers. *Personnel Psychology*, 68(3), 463-498.
- McAllister, C. P., Ellen III, B. P., & Ferris, G. R. (in press). Social influence opportunity recognition, evaluation, and capitalization: Increased theoretical

specification through political skill's dimensional dynamics. *Journal of Management*.

- McFarland, L. A., Ryan, A. M., & Kriska, S. D. (2003). Impression management use and effectiveness across assessment methods. *Journal of Management*, 29(5), 641-661.
- Munyon, T. P., Summers, J. K., Thompson, K. M., & Ferris, G. R. (2015). Political skill and work outcomes: A theoretical extension, meta-analytic investigation, and agenda for the future. *Personnel Psychology*, 68(1), 143-184.
- Rosenfeld, P., Giacalone, R. A., & Riordan, C. A. (1995). *Impression management in organizations: Theory, measurement, practice*: Van Nostrand Reinhold.
- Roulin, N., Bangerter, A., & Levashina, J. (2015). Honest and deceptive impression management in the employment interview: Can it be detected and how does it impact evaluations? *Personnel Psychology*, 68(2), 395-444.
- Shi, J., Johnson, R. E., Liu, Y., & Wang, M. (2013). Linking subordinate political skill to supervisor dependence and reward recommendations: a moderated mediation model. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 98(2), 374.
- Turnley, W. H., & Bolino, M. C. (2001). Achieving desired images while avoiding undesired images: exploring the role of self-monitoring in impression management. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 86(2), 351.
- Wayne, S. J., & Ferris, G. R. (1990). Influence tactics, affect, and exchange quality in supervisor-subordinate interactions: A laboratory experiment and field study. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 75(5), 487.
- Wayne, S. J., & Liden, R. C. (1995). Effects of impression management on performance ratings: A longitudinal study. *Academy of Management Journal*, 38(1), 232-260.